



## Exploring the Role Played By Media in the Representation of Xhosa Traditional Male Circumcision in South Africa

Lungisani Moyo<sup>1</sup> and Yanga Funani<sup>2</sup>

*Department of Communication, University of Fort Hare, Private Bag X 1314,  
Alice 5700, South Africa*

*E-mail: <sup>1</sup><lungie06@gmail.com>, <sup>2</sup><yanga.funani.da@gmail.com>*

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**ABSTRACT** The role of media in shaping cultural identity in South Africa remains a challenge. This is on the background of the main problem associated with the portrayals of Xhosa cultural practices by media productions. Thus, they portray narratives that may result in cultural practices losing their sacredness, thereby creating a cultural identity dilemma. This paper postulated that inaccurate representations from media on Xhosa culture might cause the problem of cultural dilution, as certain cultural rituals and values end up losing their significance and as a consequence some members of the society may adopt distorted identity. The paper used qualitative methodology to evaluate the phenomenon under investigation. The authors interviewed six traditional leaders and four traditional surgeons and four young Xhosa men who had undergone male traditional circumcision. The paper found out that media has too many shortfalls when it comes to its representation of the Xhosa traditional male circumcision

### INTRODUCTION

Culture embodies the knowledge, values, norms beliefs, language, perceptions and adaptations to the environment of a certain group of people. Du Preez (1997: 4) observed that these are expressed in their behaviour, habits, rules of etiquette, their architecture, clothes and the type of food they eat. Culture is the way a group of people see the world and the way they react to it. Seidman (1990: 31) observed that South Africa promotes diversity. People are at liberty to practise their own culture as long as their practice is within the boundaries of law. However, in a country where people are at liberty to practise different cultures, there is bound to be cultural intolerance amongst citizens. Hence Seidman (1990: 42) argued that, the biggest challenge in societies when it comes to culture and tolerance is the rejection of other people's culture and then thinking that their own is the best (ethnocentrism). One important part of any group's structure of beliefs is their morality; that is, understanding what is right and wrong or good behaviour for human beings. Practically every human society includes in its beliefs a set of morals. These provide rules about 'good' behaviour that make it possible for people to live together in one community (Seidman 1990: 31). Although cultural differences are visible, Du Preez (1997: 4) argues that they are not obsta-

cles but they can provide new dimensions to life and significantly enrich one's own culture. Willingness to learn about one's way of life and culture remains a huge obstacle in most communities. This space needs to be filled and the media can play that role as one of its mandates is to inform and educate.

### Objectives of the Study

This paper is guided by the following objectives

- ◆ exploring the role of the media in the construction of cultural identities in modern society
- ◆ evaluate how the media represent the Xhosa traditional circumcision
- ◆ evaluating how the role of the media manifest in the everyday lives of people

### The Context

The paper looks at the role of media in shaping cultural identity in South Africa, a case of Xhosa traditional male circumcision. It is noteworthy that Xhosa traditional male circumcision has been on the spotlight in South African due to the number of deaths recorded during the initiation time. However, it remains to be seen whether there is a true reflection of the practice by media or there has been exaggeration over the years.

### *The Xhosa People: A Historical Perspective*

Historically, the Xhosa people form part of the Bantu ethnic groups who are found in the Southern part of Africa. Largely, they are found in the Eastern and Western Provinces of South Africa and in the last two centuries throughout the southern and central-southern parts of the country. There is also another group of Xhosas known as Mfengu community in Zimbabwe (Mhahlo 2009). According to Hamann and Tuinder (2012), Xhosa-speaking peoples are divided into several tribes with related but distinct heritages. The main tribes are the Mpondo, Mpondomise, Bomvana, Xesibe, and Thembu. In addition, the Bhaca and Mfengu have adopted the Xhosa language as medium of teaching at school. The name “Xhosa” emanates from that of a legendary leader called uXhosa (Hamann and Tuinder 2012). It is believed that the word Xhosa was derived from the word (Kosa) in some San or Khoi-Khoi language meaning “angry” or “fierce”, referring to the amaXhosa people as being fierce. Currently amaXhosa people are estimated to be totalling 8 million across the length and breadth of South Africa (Xhosa Culture 2018). IsiXhosa is South Africa’s second popular local language after isiZulu. The pre-1994 apartheid system of Bantustans denied Xhosas South African citizenship and attempted to confine them to the nominally self-governing “homelands” of Transkei and Ciskei, now both are part of the Eastern Cape Province where most Xhosa remain (Xhosa Culture 2018). A large number of Xhosa people live in East London (iMonti), Port Elizabeth (Bhayi) and Cape Town. Mhahlo (2009) posits that in 2003 majority of Xhosa speaking people, roughly 5.3 million were living in the Eastern Cape. Historical evidence shows that Xhosa people have been living in the Eastern Cape since 1593 or earlier. Archaeological evidence suggests that Xhosa people have inhabited the area since the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. “By the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, the Thembu tribe was settled around the Nbashi River with the original Xhosa tribe settled in the vicinity of the Kei River and beyond” (Africa 2017: 1).

Notably, one of the main Xhosa cultural traditions which have been practised since then was male circumcision. Africa (2017) argued that Xhosa men were only allowed to marry after

undergoing the process of initiation and be circumcised. The males were regarded as boys and irresponsibility on their part was anticipated and condoned until they were circumcised. Only boys deemed ready by the elderly were permitted to undergo the process. The initiation ceremony was usually conducted in May, when the corn had ripened. The traditional surgeons, usually elderly man were given the task of performing the circumcision process. After healing of the wounds, the boys undertook excursions in the bush, hunting animals (Africa 2017). Traditional male circumcision practice dates from way back in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when the film industry emerged and up to today where the film industry has boomed. The film industry endeavours to incorporate and portray social realities and cultures. In this light, it has to be noted that the film industry plays crucial role in the dissemination of information; therefore, it is pertinent to narrow the lens so as to evaluate the role of media in construction of cultural identities in the modern society.

### *Overview of Traditional Male Circumcision*

The initiation ritual among Xhosa-speakers is accompanied by certain beliefs about manhood. These beliefs are linked to the view that for a Xhosa boy to become a man, he has to go through an initiation process. He has to go through traditional circumcision. That is the culturally accepted passage to manhood within the Xhosa culture. Hunter (1979: 24) argued that traditional circumcision and initiation into manhood is an ancient initiation rite practiced by the amaXhosa. The ritual is traditionally intended as a teaching institution to prepare young males for the responsibilities of manhood. Xhosas normally perform this tradition during the June or December holidays because they are the longest and school-going boys are easily accommodated.

The duty is performed by a man called an ‘*Ingcibi*’ who a traditional surgeon who has the duty of ensuring that the initiation process of passing a boy to manhood is done safe. After the traditional surgeon performs his duty he leaves the initiate with the traditional nurse and this man is called ‘*Ikhankatha*’, a traditional nurse who is responsible for taking care of the wound of the initiate until it heals. Both these

parties play a critical role in this ritual to the extent that it is of paramount importance that both the traditional surgeon and traditional nurse are of sober tendencies during the initiation period. Both the traditional surgeon and the traditional nurse are people who have received training and both should be known by the Department of Health. When traditional circumcision is performed by skilled traditional surgeons with appropriate post-operative care from experienced traditional nurses, the practice is usually deemed safe (Williams and Kapila 1993).

### ***Traditional Circumcision: Procedural Stages and Rationale***

Ngxamngxa (1971) established that traditional male circumcision is a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood in many cultures especially in the Xhosa culture. According to Mhlahlo (2009), traditional male circumcision, which is the removal of foreskin from the man's penis, is primarily carried out as a ritual of a male's transition to adulthood and it is mainly performed on adolescents. In the same vein, Ngxamngxa (1971: 186) argues that circumcision is a form of a ritual of transition that follows three distinct stages. These are surgical operation; isolation and a coming-out ceremony or reincorporation into the community.

The surgical operation stage of traditional circumcision is performed by a man who is called '*ingcibi*'. "Being an *ingcibi* was traditionally a calling and a gift and in some instances it was an appointment by the chief and elders" (Pauw 1994: 14). Apart from being an initiated male with over ten years as a man traditionally, the *ingcibi* should not be a person who abuses alcohol. He should be a disciplined man and respected in the community. Soga (1930: 235), in a seminal work, and Ngxamngxa (1971: 199), say that, "the '*ukudlanga*' (circumcision) operation was so mysterious that it was conceived of in magical terms". Traditionally, the instrument of choice for this stage was '*umdlanga*', a double edged sword which is used by a traditional surgeon. In a study by WHO 2008 entitled, *Male Circumcision Policy, Practices and Services in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa Case Study of 2008*, it was suggested that the Health Department monitor the use of sharp instruments

to the extent that it visited each circumcision school and made sure that the traditional surgeon present used sterilised instruments which made him compliant with the law. This was done in order to prevent the spread of bacteria to the wound due to the use of unsterile tools as that might lead to the death of an initiate (EC GOVT 2008).

The surgical operation stage is followed by a period of isolation which starts after the traditional surgeon finishes his job. During this period, the initiate is deprived of all the comforts of normal life. He is not allowed to eat food with salt and he is not allowed to drink water. The first seven days or first week are regarded as the most critical and most painful for the initiates. It is at this stage that most lives are lost because of dehydration. According to Soga (1931: 254), "during the first seven days of seclusion the initiates are debarred from fresh food, green food, meat and water". The reason for that is to teach the initiate that there will be times of hardship in life. After that period of being isolated from the normal pleasures that the initiate was used to, a ceremony called '*Umojiso*' is performed. The ceremony signifies a new start. It is at this stage that the initiate recovers, when he finally gets to eat food with vitamins which will assist the body to fight the bacteria which will delay the healing process. At the ceremony a goat or a sheep is slaughtered and the initiate is allowed to eat meat. The initiates are still expected to observe certain taboos even after this ceremony.

The coming out ceremony is the greatest day in every boy's life and is performed when the initiate has healed, (normally after four or more weeks), men from the society are sent to go and fetch him from the bush (Mtuzze 2004). Ngxamngxa (1971: 190) argued that the termination of the seclusion and preparation for reincorporation into the community is usually begun by a race to the river, or a ritual washing in cases where there is no river. The initiate is then anointed with expensive butter by a man who is highly respected in society. The coming-out ceremony is a welcoming ceremony which is done when the initiate comes back from the bush. The ceremony is called '*Umgidi*'. This ceremony becomes a formal entrance characterised by a meal in common and the exchange of gifts. It may further involve eating, drinking, smoking togeth-

er, being attached to each other, being covered together or sitting together on the same seat (Van Gennep 1960: 28). The togetherness, which is focused on the one who has just emerged from initiation, symbolises that the participant is no longer a boy, but is being incorporated into manhood with full privileges and all the responsibilities of the new community.

### *The Significance of Traditional Circumcision*

While traditional circumcision is regarded as a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood as stated by the authors earlier on, it can also be regarded as one of the agents for change. Driver (1991: 93) argued this when he said, "Rites of passage are performed not simply to mark transitions but to affect them." According to Peterson (1989: 68) and Meel (2005: 58), the first recorded cases of Xhosa initiation were in 1789. Meel (2005: 58) further argued that the ages of the boys who went for initiation were observed to be nine years and they wore penis caps and waist strings. John Henderson Soga (1931: 240), son of well-known Tiyo Soga, gives a more convincing explanation. He traces the historical background of this rite from Abram, the founder of Israel who at the age of 99 circumcised himself and his entire household (Gire 2002: 17). He accepted circumcision as a sign of a covenant between himself and God. This led to his name being changed from Abram to Abraham, which means the father of many nations.

The name change to Abraham had to do with more than just a name. It also influenced his change of identity and destiny. This is similar to the Xhosa practice of the rite. Immediately after the traditional operation by the *ingcibi*, the boy is instructed to say '*ndiyindoda*' (I am a man) and the *ingcibi* responds '*uyiyoindoda*' (you are a man) (Meel 2005: 58). After the boy graduates to *ubudoda* (manhood) he is given a new name, which symbolises the beginning of a new life and his incorporation into a new society: adulthood with all its privileges and responsibilities. Seidman (1990: 38) argued that customs and traditions usually are not created purely by chance. Nearly always there is a sensible reason for them to develop. Many customs reinforce the way the community is organised and make it work smoothly. This is the case with the tradi-

tional circumcision custom. It introduces boys who have graduated to manhood to the new order of things. Traditional male circumcision has fundamental significance in the development of young man into manhood.

### *The Mental Aspect*

The newly initiated has to show mental development. The way he does things is expected to change. He is expected to show growth. One of the main functions of the Xhosa culture is to help give direction to the changes in society and to help understand these changes as they occur (Seidman 1990). The newly initiated is expected to view things from a different point of view. He is expected to reason like a mature person as he is a man. In cases in which the expected outcome is not realised after the ritual, the blame is put on the initiate for his lack of mental capacity or in some cases on the way the ritual was performed with some aspects of it not being properly observed (Young 1965). Gitywa (1976) observed that one of the most important things in the life of a newly initiated *ikrwala* is a change of behaviour. A clear distinction can be seen between a boy who is not circumcised and the man who has been circumcised. Anti-social behaviour is characteristic of boys and not men (Gitywa 1976).

### *Spiritual Aspect*

The Xhosa people are not the only people who practice circumcision. Other people practice circumcision as an act of religion and spirituality. To a large extent, for the Xhosa people, circumcision also has a religious connotation. Soga (1931) argued that, though there is no religious ceremony connected with the rite of circumcision, it has a religious significance undoubtedly. When the initiate has completed the rite of circumcision he is expected to enter into a new relationship with the ancestors (Soga 1930). The killing of animals during initiation is said to involve dedicating the victims to the ancestors (Ngxamngxa 1971). From the Biblical point of view, the ritual of circumcision dates as far back as the Old Testament. Circumcision was a covenant between God and his people. In the New International Version: Genesis 17: 10-14 "This is my

covenant with you and your descendants after you, the covenant you are to keep: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You are to undergo circumcision, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you. For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with your money, they must be circumcised. My covenant in your flesh is to be an everlasting covenant. Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant". Jews and some Christians still believe that circumcision is a covenant between the initiate and God and some go as far as believing that a boy is not clean if he is not circumcised.

### ***Social Aspect***

In African societies there are hierarchies and groupings. There's a distinction between the elderly and the youth. One of the most important things that distinguish an elderly person from a young person is behaviour. Initiation schools are where behaviour is moulded. Gitywa (1976) observed that one of the most important things in the life of a newly initiated *ikrwala* is a change of behaviour. A clear distinction can be seen between a boy who is not circumcised and the man who has. Anti-social behaviour is characteristic of boys and not men (Gitywa 1976). A boy is not regarded as a complete person and the transition from being a boy to being a man carries a lot of responsibility. It also includes his new status with other men as well. The right to have children and establish a family is also part of this new change. However, the most important aspect is the vertical relationship that involves ancestors (Gitywa 1976). The initiate is taught to honour and respect the ancestors by adhering to the customs and carrying forward the rituals that he witnessed, to his progeny (Gitywa 1976).

### ***Stereotypes Associated with Male Circumcision***

Mavundla et al. (2010) highlighted that male circumcision among the Xhosa people of South

Africa depict the elevation of a boy into manhood. The manhood status attained after the ritual affords men power and authority in the community over women and uncircumcised men. Therefore, uninitiated men experience great pressures to get circumcised. In addition, ritual circumcision is an important aspect of Xhosa culture that serves to legitimize a person as a man and a full member of the community (in the emic sense); hence, one of the important reasons why Xhosa men prefer to undergo ritual circumcision is that it gives them power in society (Meissner and Buso 2007). In the same vein, it is believed that in Xhosa tradition men have to be initiated in order to marry, to inherit property, and to participate in cultural activities such as offering sacrifices and community discussions. Thus the power that is accorded to ritually circumcised males is associated with greater rights and responsibilities, and also gives these men a higher standing in society (Meissner and Buso 2007). It also gives men power to appease ancestral spirits because only men can speak to the ancestors (Meissner and Buso 2007).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This paper is underpinned by the agenda setting theory in its quest to explore the role of Media in shaping Cultural identity in South Africa using the Xhosa traditional male circumcision as its case study.

### ***Agenda Setting Theory***

Agenda setting describes a very powerful influence of the media in the sense that it has the ability to tell us what issues are important. According to McCombs (2002: 26), agenda-setting theory describes the "ability [of the news media] to influence the importance placed on the topics of the public agenda". With agenda setting being a social science theory, it also attempts to make predictions. That is, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently, the audience will regard the issue as more important. As far back as 1922, the newspaper columnist Walter Lippman was concerned that the media had the power to present images to the public. McCombs and Shaw (2002) investigated presidential campaigns in 1968, 1972 and 1976.

In the research done in 1968 they focused on two elements: awareness and information (Eissler et al. 2014).

Investigating the agenda-setting function of the mass media, they attempted to assess the relationship between what voters in one community said were important issues and the actual content of the media messages used during the campaign. Shaw (2010) concluded that the mass media exerted a significant influence on what voters considered to be the major issues of the campaign. It is worthy to note that in the first three decades since its inception, researchers applied agenda setting theory to political issues, the 'civic arena' as denoted by McCombs (2004: 53). However, in the last decade, certain 'centrifugal trends' have occurred as some researchers have started to apply agenda setting theory in other areas outside politics (McCombs 2004). For instance, Carroll and McCombs (2003) argued that both first- and second-order agenda setting should be applicable in determining business reputation; whereas Meijer and Klein-nijenhuis (2006: 543) found empirical evidence that both first- and second-level agenda setting theory "are valuable for understanding the effects of issues in business news" (Ragas et al. 2014).

This paper expands this application of agenda setting theory in cultural contexts (cultural agenda setting theory) by investigating first- and second-order agenda setting within the context of the market for art-house films. First, following first- and second-level agenda theory, the study argues that media has a key role in terms of agenda setting in cultural contexts. According to Symeou et al. (2013: 4) "films receiving higher media visibility and favourable media valence will have higher levels of public salience". Therefore the agenda setting theory will be used to try and understand the role of media in the construction of cultural identity.

### *Core Assumptions and Statements*

The core assumption of the agenda-setting is the creation of public awareness and concern for salient issues by the news media. According to Rogers and Dearing (1988), there are two basic assumptions that underlie most research on agenda-setting: (i) the press and the media do

not reflect reality; they filter and shape it; (ii) media concentration on a few issues and subjects leads the public to perceive those issues as more important than other issues. One of the most critical aspects in the concept of an agenda-setting role of mass communication is the time frame for this phenomenon (Rogers et al. 1997). In addition, different media have different agenda-setting potential. Agenda-setting theory seems quite appropriate in understanding the pervasive role of the media in the construction of cultural identity. Cohen (1963) stated: "The media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about" (Cohen 1963).

### *Cultural Agenda Setting*

The main idea behind cultural agenda setting theory is that the transfer of salience by the media to the public also applies to the case of cultural practises or, more broadly, cultural objects such as works of art, artists and cultural organizations (Zyglidopoulos et al. 2013: 4). For the first level of agenda setting, this implies that cultural practises that receive high levels of media visibility or media coverage acquire "public salience" as the public talks about them. For the second level, cultural agenda setting suggests that the media also influences the attributes of various cultural objects. For example, through media valence, the positive, neutral or negative tone the media adopts regarding a particular cultural object is then transferred to the public. To understand why agenda setting theory is expected to apply in the case of cultural practices and objects, it is imperative to first briefly discuss the theoretical rationale behind agenda setting phenomena in general.

Previous agenda setting research has identified the need for orientation (NFO) as the main reason behind the transfer of salience from the media to the public and in turn that the NFO depends on the uncertainty and relevance of a particular object. NFO "refers to the tendency of an individual to seek information about an issue in the news media" (Matthes 2006: 423) and according to McCombs (2004: 67), it constitutes "the most prominent of the contingent conditions for agenda-setting effects". This

position has been confirmed through empirical work by Matthes (2006, 2008). Therefore, the greater the NFO that a particular public has regarding an object, the greater will be the transfer of salience from the media to the public. The NFO, however, is not the “lowest” concept that agenda setting theorists have identified as driving agenda setting phenomena. McCombs (2004: 54) identifies two “lower-order concepts”, uncertainty and relevance, which he sees as determining the public’s NFO. Relevance refers to the perceived importance of a given object or issue (McCombs 2004; Weaver 1980), whereas uncertainty refers to the information that one needs about the particular issue (Weaver 1980).

Agenda setting theory applies to cultural contexts because in dealing with cultural practises, individuals have a high level of NFO, driven both by uncertainty and relevance and also by the experiential nature of cultural practises (Yang et al. 2012). First, uncertainty is inherent in the evaluation of cultural practises and objects. Second, many cultural practises have great relevance for everyday life. Third, particularly within cultural contexts, the experiential nature of cultural products further enhances the NFO by individuals.

### MATERIAL AND METHODS

This paper employs a qualitative research design. Qualitative research is primarily exploratory research. It is used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons and opinions. It provides insight into the problem or helps to develop ideas or hypotheses for potential quantitative research (Bernard and Bernard 2012). According to De Vos et al. (2011) qualitative design is dialectic and revelatory in nature, implying that during the interaction between the researcher and the research participants, the participants’ world is discovered and interpreted by means of the qualitative method. Considering that this study seeks to view the world through the eyes of the participants themselves, qualitative design is ideal as it views human behaviour as a product of how people interpret their world. The researchers selected a qualitative method of inquiry because it is exploratory in nature and provides room for the researchers to interpret the lived experiences of the participants. Therefore

qualitative research enabled the researchers to have a deeper understanding of the role of media in the construction of cultural identities in modern society. In this context, the views of Xhosa people were considered in order to come up with a study that is reliable and objective.

### Measures

The population for this paper was comprised of twenty respondents drawn from a rural area located in the Buffalo City Metropolitan area in the Eastern Cape Province in South Africa. In their quest to get an informed response, authors used purposive/convenience sampling which is a non-probability criterion-based technique for selecting a sample from the target population and purposively selected a sample comprising of six (6) traditional leaders, six (6) traditional surgeons, four (4) male elders and four (4) young Xhosa men who had undergone male traditional circumcision. The authors used in-depth semi-structured, interviews as a tool for collecting data and recorded the conversations with the permission of the respondents.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Analysis of Respondents Views on Representation of Culture in Media

Authors wanted to understand the respondents’ views on the representation of culture in media. It is noteworthy that, questions in this section are guided by the following questions:

- ♦ What is the role of the media in the construction of cultural identities in modern society?
- ♦ How does this role manifest in the everyday lives of people?
- ♦ How do the media represent the Xhosa traditional circumcision?

In the quest to answer the above questions, the authors asked respondents the question: To what extent can culture be represented on media platforms such as films? In answering the question the majority of the respondents had the same sentiment, thus their response was in line with the one quoted below:

*"I think it should be done with good intentions with purposes to advance and enhance the tradition. Therefore the films will need to educate the masses, omit the parts that happen in the mountains. Show the challenges and promote the nobleness and celebratory event that is traditional initiation."*

The other respondents wanted the media to depict the Xhosa male traditional circumcision with objectivity and true reflection of what transpires on the ground. This is as seen in the response below:

*"To the extent of objectivity and proper consultation but above all truth."*

Other respondents said the media must expose everything. This is as noted below when their line of response was:

*"As long as the culture affects the well-being of any society, in this case it would be the ever increasing initiation death toll. There shouldn't be any limits in confronting and talking about such on media platforms."*

It was evident from the responses given by all the respondents that there is general consensus that the media has the right to present cultural practices either via films or any other platform as long as it tells the truth about that particular culture. To them the media must not be a vehicle for spreading fake news or reporting on the ills of a particular culture which are not in fact practiced by that tribe. This negative portrayal by the media is consistent with the writings of Poncian (2015) who have confirmed that media have continued to create images of Africa that portray her as reductive, dependent and crisis-ridden.

It was important for the authors to solicit the views of the respondents on their anticipation on how the media should represent culture. Thus the respondents were asked: How do you think culture should be represented on media platforms? The responses were well informed as seen by what the first respondents said. They were of the view that the media must play its role in society that is to inform, educate and entertain. However they pointed out that in it (media) fulfilling its role it must not distort the truth but rather expose in a good way the wrongs that happens in society in the name of culture. The majority of the respondent had this to say:

*"Inform the public about the advancement plans and bring experts to reveal the dangers of those measures to help people make informed decisions."*

The other respondents said:

*"Yes of course it's the only way we can learn about each other and from each other and for good understanding."*

Others had this to say:

*"It should be represented in a way that wouldn't offend those involved. At the same time it shouldn't hide anything that will be of harm to the public or society in the name of "secrecy" of culture."*

This paper sought to explore the role played by media in the representation of Xhosa traditional male circumcision in South Africa. In the quest to get an understanding on the way media represents culture the authors asked the question; do you think media is making positive contributions in decision making, especially in matters related to cultural identity? In their response, most of the respondents said:

*"The media reports accurately in most instances, however I believe they need to invest time to engage with traditional leaders as they do with politicians to understand some of the dynamics. And culture not only in media it is often pushed back in various parts of our lives. Maybe media can do more to increase the volume on content related to cultural identities."*

The other respondent echoed their sentiments by saying:

*"I do want to believe that. At the same time I still believe there is a need for proper consultations with all involved stakeholders to ensure there aren't any distortions or misinterpretations in reporting or publishing anything that surrounds culture or tradition."*

While the other respondents had this to say:

*"Not all the time. It's mostly distorted for dramatic effect. But some good has been achieved in certain instances."*

It was clear that respondents thought the media to some extent distort the truth and there is need to consult the traditional leaders of any culture before presenting it to the general populace. This to them will reduce dilution of a certain culture or false reporting on a particular culture.



In as much as the authors sought to explore the role played by media in the representation of Xhosa traditional male circumcision in South Africa. There was need for respondents to voice their suggestions on what can be done to promote the correct portrayal of culture through the media. Thus the authors asked the question: What do you suggest must be done to improve the representation of culture in media? Respondents were allowed to respond in their own free will and come with suggestions to improve the way culture and Xhosa culture in this instance is presented by the media. The majority of the respondent concurred that:

*"Maybe appoint reporters that will be designated to culture as their beat just like in other spheres such as politics, education and health etc. And also dedicate time to tackle various subjects on tradition and heritage and not only during heritage month."*

The other respondents were of the view that:

*"Consult with every stakeholder. Journalists, writers, film makers should do proper and factual research about other people's cultures and then understand the sensitivity surrounding them."*

While the other respondent noted that:

*"Let people of the culture write about their culture instead of getting people from foreign lands to write misinformed information."*

The authors discovered that all the respondents were of the view that there is need for proper consultation and even going a step further to appoint reporters who are aware of the culture the media intends to show to the general populace. The key word voiced by respondents in their answers was consultation.

The authors concluded the interviews by asking for comments, contributions or comments from the interviewees. This was done so as to be able to come up with practical recommendations as pointed by the traditional leaders who are the patrons of the Xhosa culture that is partly under study. Respondents contributed and the first respondent responded by posing an important question. Respondents expressed similar views when they said:

*"A.a ndidiniwe (I am tired) chief... ndiyadla (jokes)...Do you think media is the last practical hope to sustain culture going forward?"*

The other respondents suggested that:

*"There should be a traditions and customs ombudsman in South Africa for media related issues as well as civil cases against mal-practice of traditional healing practices and witchcraft."*

While the respondent on the other hand contributed by saying:

*"The emphasis of culture is essential at this time in society, as a means of promoting black consciousness in society today."*

The authors noted that all the respondents were concerned with the way culture is portrayed by the media however there is hope and if consultation is done there can be improvement in the way media represents culture especially Xhosa traditional male circumcision .

### **Analysis of Participants Views on Culture, Media and Identity Construction**

In order for the authors to be able to solicit valid responses from the respondents, questions were posed to the interviewees with the intention that they will provide answers that will contribute to this paper. The authors transcribed the answers as they were provided by respondents. In so doing, the authors tried by all means to correct grammar without distorting their answers. Respondents were asked to provide their own views on what is the role of the media in the construction of cultural identities in modern society? In their response, respondents had different but related answers to this question. The majority of the respondents pointed out that:

*"The primary role of the media is to educate, inform and enlighten the public about surroundings and help to shape public opinion. In this case media has a duty to inform different cultures about challenges faced by their own heritage and offer solutions. Media, however should not attempt to construct different cultures identities."*

The other respondents said:

*"The media plays a significant role in recording, documenting and ensuring there are credible sources that can attest to the cultures plus traditions of the people of whichever respective area. As a means of upholding traditions, the media ought to be producing and showcasing more cultural content as means of not only preventing a respective culture from*

*being forgotten but also ensuring the indigenous people most especially the youth not to find themselves adopting a foreign culture which they might have a greater exposure to."*

Some respondents had this to say:

*"In communities where the people do not own media (mostly 3<sup>rd</sup> world countries), or the means of producing media, there will naturally be a cultural melting pot from consuming foreign content. In Africa, the role played by media- foreign and local – has been that of struggle and a people a danger to themselves. As a result the mentality and reaction of the people will be what they consume on a daily basis in the media. When they do not perpetuate this pitiful content, they escape to a Western world perspective of reality and culture, i.e. language, fashion and thought. However, I would not say that foreign media in 3<sup>rd</sup> world communities deliberately want to dilute or influence cultures- except in the cases of propaganda. Foreign media reflects the culture of people owning the means of production – for better or worse. In a nutshell, mass media has created a global village where the producers with most content set the tone and rules of engagement of communities who consume."*

The answers provided by all of the respondents shows that they are all aware of the role of the media in the construction of cultural identities in modern society. This means that their responses will assist the authors to evaluate the role of media in the construction of cultural identities, in modern society which is one of the objectives of this paper. Respondents were of the view that the role of media is to inform, educate and entertain the general populace. It was also evident that respondents are of the view that the role of media is to correctly represent facts as they are and not to distort them as is seen in some films that shows Xhosa traditional male circumcision.

The views of respondents are in line with the agenda setting theory which describe the influence of media in process of identity construction. The theoretical framework succinctly express that texts, images and videos represented in the media tend to shape how individuals construct, alter and adopt identities. This resonates with this inquiry on the role played by

Media in the representation of Xhosa traditional male circumcision in South Africa.

Respondents were also asked to explain in their own words what they understand about Xhosa culture. Their responses showed that they are aware of the Xhosa culture and this shows that this group of respondents was the right population for this paper. Their responses helped the authors understand the perspective of respondents when it comes to the Xhosa culture. Their responses are as elucidated below.

The majority of respondents had this to say in response to the question:

*"It is the norm, values, practice and beliefs of the Xhosa tribes. It is what differentiates them from other tribes in the country and across the world."*

The other respondents went an extra mile to even say the clan name of the Xhosa tribe, that's when they said:

*"Amabamba, Amatshawe, oCirha, amaMpinga oDlamini noRhadebe:*

*And right there is the beauty of the African language and culture as one cannot exist without the other. From the moment you honor/greet a fellow African or Xhosa by his clan name, already a whole history and heritage of his origin is exchanged and a sudden familiarity and/or friendship is begotten at first encounter. However, amaXhosa cultural custom and traditions are waning and African academics of all persuasions should gather and heed the clarion call that for the protection and preservation of a waning heritage - because in Africa, it is through language that legends, parables and customs are immortalised. Language is an umbilical cord to our ancestry and a time capsule for our oral history. The Xhosa Culture was one of the first democracies in Africa and perhaps the world. Our traditions and customs have always practiced respect for fellow humans through the values of Ubuntu and also respect for nature in our use and preservation of natural and organic products. If a cow is slaughtered, we used every part of it and nothing to waste as a form of respect to the animal life.*

The other respondents on the other hand said:

*"Xhosa people are the descendants of South Africa, having arrived in the eleventh century*

and pushed the original Khoi descendants further away. Xhosa people pride themselves in their culture and the culture involves lengthy rituals, circumcisions and feasts. The culture includes various rites of passages that are done in different life stages such as imbeleko and ulwaluko. Imbeleko is done after a child is born to be formally introduced to their ancestors, while ulwaluko is a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood.”

The authors posed a question concerning Xhosa traditional circumcision. Thus the authors asked the respondents that, Xhosa people practice traditional male circumcision; in your own words can you tell me your understanding and significance of this practice? Respondents were asked to give their honest view and or knowledge of the Xhosa traditional male circumcision. The collective views of respondents depicted the deep understanding of the Xhosa traditional male circumcision. Thus the majority of the respondents pointed out that:

*“The traditional male circumcision or ulwaluko is an initiation of a boy to manhood. Basically it goes beyond the circumcision part of the tradition. It is a rite of passage to help a boy Xhosa child to understand the responsibilities manhood entails. The initiation is usually done in mountains and secluded places, where only males allowed. Senior experienced men devote their time with the males (abakwetha) undergoing rite of passage to pass down wisdom.”*

The other respondents said:

*“The tradition of circumcision goes back as far as the biblical times of Moses and the Jews who were or would be God’s chosen people. Who are the real Jews? No one can know for sure in modern times. There are close links between amaXhosa and Jewish customary practices as told and described in historic texts – these practices are circumcision, animal sacrifice rituals, as well as priesthood/traditional clothing patterns and design. The intention of circumcision in modern Xhosa history was to initiate a boy into manhood. The circumcision was a symbol and a covenant of values taught to these young men. These values and philosophies included but were not limited to: Know who you are, respect yourself and your elders, commitment to your cause. In modern times, the*

*environment has had a negative impact on the tradition of circumcision. We lack good and successful role models of our time.”*

While other respondents noted that:

*“Traditional male circumcision on its own is something Xhosa people could claim as their own. The common understanding is that every tribe or races do practice circumcision in their own respective ways. To the Xhosa nation male circumcision represents a phase of a boy entering into manhood. He usually stays in an initiation school for a 3/6 week period where he is taught about manhood, life responsibilities etc. He is then sent back home after he’s healed and starts his new journey into manhood.”*

Authors noted that, in their responses, respondents echoed the same sentiments. All the respondents noted that, Xhosa male circumcision is performed as a rite of passage for Xhosa boys into manhood. Thus, it is where boys are educated about what it takes to be a real man with the responsibilities that comes with being a man not only for their families but for the community as a whole. The authors wanted to know the understanding of the respondents about media hence asking the question, according to your understanding about media. What is media?

This question was important because it enabled the authors to understand whether respondents were on the same page with them for if they did not have any idea of what media is then the likelihood will be that they will not be able to provide relevant answers for this paper. In answering the question, most respondents pointed out that:

*“The common understanding is that media is collective communication tools that disseminate information to the public to form public opinion. Media has a role to educate and enlighten the society about a range of issues and report on current affairs. Media also has a role to be a watchdog and report and expose various injustices.”*

The other respondents had this to say:

*“Media refers to various means of communication. For example, television, radio, and the newspaper are different types of media.”*

Some of the respondents said:

*“Media is a tool of communication between individuals or masses. It is a platform of engaging, exchanging of information including in-*

*tainment and entertainment to a broader spectrum of people from different walks of life and different continents as media has made the world into one big global village."*

It was clear from their responses that respondents were well aware of what media is. This means that their answers were precise and it is what the authors were looking for. In other words, their responses validate the paper since they provide answers to the research questions.

It was also important for the authors to ascertain if respondents are aware of any advantages and or disadvantages associated with the use of media in modern society. Hence the researchers posed this question to the respondents: What are the advantages and disadvantages of using media in this modern society? In their responses, respondents pointed some negative as well as positive effects of media in modern society. Some of the respondents said:

*"The media broadens your knowledge on a range of issues that affect the society you live in. It helps you gain insight on a number of issues and help one to form a comprehensive understanding of societal issues."*

The other respondents said:

*"The advantage is that it has made the world smaller and communication instant. The disadvantage would be the blurred lines between truth and fiction which gives people a false sense of reality or truth. There's too much information for untrained minds."*

Another set of respondents said:

*"Advantages is that we can get to learn more about our cultures while disadvantages is that the media tends to let people who are not clued up about the sensitive issues in our cultures to produce content that can easily offend those involved in that particular culture."*

The authors deduced that all the respondents were well aware of the negative and or positive effects of media in modern society. This was shown by their responses which among other issues pointed out that, the media has both positive and negative effects. Thus they mentioned that, the media has made access of information to the general populace easy whilst at the same time it comes with negative whereby it exposes children to sexually and criminal explicit images.

The authors wanted to establish if there is any link between culture and media hence pos-

ing this question to the interviewees: is there a link between culture and media? It is noteworthy that this question was seen as one of the core objectives of this research. In their responses, respondents had varying but similar responses to this question. It was seen from their responses that respondents were of the view that there is and remains a link between culture and media. This is due to the portrayal of culture by the media although there tends to be distortion in the process. Majority of the respondents were of the common view that:

*"Cultures should remain under the custodianship of their people, such as traditional leaders and affected societies. Media however, can inform people about the evolution that is taking place and some of the critical challenges that may threaten their culture. And also to help society on how they can fit their tradition in modern day."*

The other respondents said:

*"There's always a link. Media is a communication tool and people will always have a need to communicate within their culture, communicate their and intercultural communication."*

While the other respondents pointed out that:

*"Yes, people have cultural perceptions and prejudices based on what they see on the media."*

It was clear from the responses above that all the interviewees suggest that there indeed is a link between media and culture. This is a view that the researchers also agrees with. This is because the media shows most of the time a true reflection of different cultures without fear, prejudice or favor. This is in line with the arguments postulated by O'Neill (1998) who noted that, media endow with knowledge and news related to basic events necessary for coherent jurisdictions of people. At the same time, it also acts as a forum through securing the admittance to various category of information which people swap over.

The authors also wanted to establish whether the interviewees think that the media is responsible or can shape cultural identities. In the quest to understand this, the researchers posed the question: Do you think media can shape cultural identities? This argument was driven by the portrayal of Xhosa traditional circumcision. In their responses, interviewees had dif-

ferent ideas to share. However most respondents had this to share:

*“The belief is that, they can inform people on challenges and developments taking place but they should not impose ideas on how arrange their cultural standing.”*

The other respondents pointed out that:

*“Not necessarily the identity of the culture, but definitely its behavior and meaning within that culture. By behavior I’ll make an example of the word Mlungu: this used to be a Xhosa cultural reference to the white foam of the ocean. In the 1600’s its meaning changed to refer to the white people who arrived from the oceans and in the 21<sup>st</sup> century the word influenced the behaviour of Back people to be more western and having achieved this, even black successful people are referred to as abeLungu.”*

Some of the respondents on the other hand said:

*“That is a complex question to ask, however through the television there is at the most a perception of a misrepresentation of people’s cultures, which has resulted in angry outbursts from people who are aware of the actual culture. However, the media has at times been a victim of promoting American culture which has seen the youth being drawn to that culture more than being proud of their own culture, but with that being said, there is no thorough way of evaluating or analysing the role of media within the forming of cultural identities.”*

The responses gathered here are consistent with the writings of MacKinnon and Heise (2011: 466) who argued that “people confirm themselves cognitively and effectively in creating, selecting, and enacting identities in [a] particular media”.

### CONCLUSION

It was evident in this paper that respondents were of the view that the role of media is to inform, educate and entertain the general populace. It was also evident that respondents are of the view that the role of media is to correctly represent facts as they are and not to distort them. It was also evident in this research that respondents were of the notion that the role of media in the construction of cultural identities in modern society comes with diluted views.

However the main points raised by the respondents were that the media is not doing its best to present the actual cultural practices. It was also evident in this paper that community members were not pleased at all with the way their culture is presented on media platforms. It was however discovered that there are those amongst community members as seen through some of the responses of one of the respondents who think that the exposure of all the negative things done during initiation by the media is a good thing. To them it serves as a wakeup call to the traditional leaders to follow up on the cultural practice of ukwaluka.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The authors recommend that there must be a robust consultation by the media when reporting on traditional practices of different cultures so as to eliminate negative or biased reporting. Media must also consult with the elderly since they are the custodians of African tradition. The authors also recommend that future research should be conducted wherein the focus is on the portrayal of African tradition by the media be it print or broadcast media.

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